

Movie Review: 'The Simpsons Movie'

by Arthur Salm

Don't have a cow, man, but "The Simpsons Movie" is an underachiever.

Which is to say it's fun, and better than most of the twaddle that's out there, on big screen or (not-so-)small(-anymore). But in the end - and from the very beginning, for that matter - it's nothing more than a "Simpsons" episode writ, or rather, animated large.

'THE SIMPSONS MOVIE' - When Homer mistakenly pollutes the river with toxic waste from the power plant, he loses his job and forces evacuation from Springfield, possibly forever. CNS Photo courtesy of Matt Groening. RATINGS

4 STARS - Excellent.

3 STARS - Worthy.

2 STARS - Mixed.

1 STAR - Poor.

0 - Forget It (a dog.) For reasons either not fully explained or not at all memorable, Homer (voiced, as always, by Dan Castellaneta) becomes infatuated with a pig, which he brings home to become the latest member of the Simpson household. Marge (Julie Kavner) is aghast: A twirly tail is one of the ominous signs portended by

Grandpa Abe in the speaking-in-tongues vision he experienced in church.

Doesn't take long for the other signs to manifest themselves, and for Homer's blundering selfishness (triggered by - what else? - doughnuts) to engineer what seems will be the destruction of the town of Springfield. Villains include the Environmental Protection Agency and the president of the United States, a man who is currently the governor of a very large western state. Guess.

Various plot lines don't so much intertwine as take turns. Bart (Nancy Cartwright), fed up with his old man at last, eyes Flanders as a possible substitute. Lisa (Yeardley Smith) finds a kindred soul in a young musician/environmentalist from Ireland, whose father is not, he must keep insisting, Bono. With the family in exile and Springfield seemingly doomed, Marge stands by her man - but only up to a point, when ...

All of which comes across as rather, you should pardon the expression, two-dimensional. "The Simpsons Movie," for all of its wit - it's a "Simpsons," remember - and enhanced animation, diminishes its beloved subjects. They fill the screen, but are flattened by it. Homer's instant ditty, "Spider Pig," (Spider Pig, Spider Pig / Does Whatever a Spider Pig Does) is infectious and funny in the TV trailers; at the movies, in the dark, it's just ... silly.

There are, as one would expect, fine moments. American non-idiots Green Day get the Springfield Treatment in a spot-on cameo. Bart's reaction to Flanders' wooing him with an extra-special cup of hot chocolate is inspired, giddy madness. Marge and Homer's Disneyesque sex scene (you heard me) is frame-by-frame perfect.

But too many of the ideas fall short of the high standard the show itself has set. (Eleven writers are credited, which explains a lot.) Bart's nude skateboarding escapade is a shameless - make that, shameful - steal from the first "Austin Powers." Springfield has faced more imaginative threats. Moe is barely even Moe. Apu is all but missing.

And, although "The Simpsons Movie" is rated PG-13, the material has been softened; the characters are like

hunks of glass put through a tumbler to blunt their heretofore cutthroat edges.

At the outset, Homer ridicules us for paying for what we get for free on television. For once, Doughnut Man is onto something.

A 20th Century Fox release. Director: David Silverman. Writers: Matt Groening, James L. Brooks, Al Jean, Ian Maxtone-Graham, George Meyer, David Mirkin, Mike Reiss, Mike Scully, Matt Selmán, John Swartzwelder, John Vitti. Cast: Dan Castellaneta, Julie Kavner, Nancy Cartwright, Yeardley Smith, Hank Azaria, Harry Shearer, Albert Brooks, Minnie Driver. Running time: 1 hour, 25 minutes. Rated PG-13. 2 1/2 stars.

Movie Review: 'The Simpsons Movie' by Arthur Salm